

Interview With Al Arabiya Television January 26, 2005

The President. Before you ask your question, Lukman, let me—if you don't mind, I'd like to say one thing to the Iraqi people. This is a historic opportunity for the people of Iraq to vote for a Government. And I want to express my appreciation for the courageous Iraqis who are willing to step forth and promote democracy and urge all the citizens in Iraq to vote and to show the terrorists they cannot stop the march of freedom.

I'm proud of the country. I'm proud of the citizens and look forward to the day when Iraq is democratic and free with Iraqi traditions and Iraqi customs. And it will be a grand day on Sunday.

Upcoming Iraqi Elections

Lukman Ahmed. Thank you, Mr. President. And that's before we thank you again for giving us this opportunity here on Al Arabiya. We'd like to congratulate you for entering your second term. But with regard to this Iraqi election, do you expect a big or a good voter turnout?

The President. You know, it is amazing, first of all, they're having a vote at all. A couple of years ago, people would have been puzzled by someone saying that the Iraqis will be given a chance to vote. And now they are. I know this: I know thousands and thousands of Iraqis want to vote. I know they cherish the idea of being able to vote, and I hope as many Iraqis vote as possible.

U.S. Super Stallion Helicopter Crash in Iraq

Mr. Ahmed. Let me ask you how you feel about this incident today, about the helicopter incident. How do you feel about it, and will that affect your engagement in Iraq?

The President. I appreciate you bringing that up. First of all, any time a soldier loses life is a sad day, sad for the family, sad for the friends, sad for his or her fellow troops. And we offer our prayers and condolences and ask for God's grace and comfort on those who suffer.

Today a tragic helicopter accident is a reminder of the risks inherent in military operations. We mourn the loss of life. But I am

convinced we're doing the right thing by helping Iraq become a free country, because a free Iraq will have long-term effects in the world and it will help the people of Iraq realize their dreams and aspirations and hopes.

Sunni's Role Following Elections

Mr. Ahmed. Some details, sir, about this election. As you know, that the Iraqis will go to vote, Shi'as whom expected to participate in large numbers and Sunni whom expected to participate in smaller numbers. What is the role you see Sunnis as playing in Iraq after the election?

The President. Well, first of all, I hope all Sunnis vote. I think it's very important. Secondly, I've been heartened by some of the comments of Shi'a leadership that has said the new Government must be inclusive, that, in order for Iraq to achieve its ultimate objective, which is a stable, free society, that everybody ought to be able to participate in the writing of the constitution, that there needs to be respect for minority rights. And to me, those are very healthy, important comments that are being made by Shi'a leaders. And it is an understanding that a free society is one which honors the voices of all.

Iran

Mr. Ahmed. Mr. President, there are report coming out of Iraq suggesting that the Iranian are getting millions of dollars into Iraq, sending people to influence the election. First, how do you plan to deal with Iranian to this regard?

The President. Well, one way is to speak clearly and make it very clear that the Iranians should not be trying to unduly influence the elections. I'm confident that the Iraqi citizens will want Iraq to be free from any influence—in other words, they want to be able to vote and elect people that will represent their views, not the views of a foreign government.

Mr. Ahmed. If I may follow up. Will it concern you that some sort of pro-Iranian Government will emerge?

The President. Well, I don't think so. I think that the Iraqis who are willing to serve are people who understand that the future of Iraq depends upon Iraqi nationalism and the Iraq character—the character of Iraq and

Iraqi people emerging. You know, there's been longtime problems between Iran and Iraq, and I'm confident that Iraqi nationalism and Iraqi pride and the history of Iraq and traditions of Iraq will be the main focus of the new Government and reflect the new Government.

Mr. Ahmed. Another issue regarding that or concerning that country and its tradition is monitored in statements regarding Iran. Mr. Vice President warned Israel not to have any action against Iran. In Israel, nevertheless, they think that a strike on Iran will help to delay the nuclear effort, like the strike on Iraq by Israel on 1981. How do you force this situation?

The President. Well, I think we can solve this problem diplomatically. And I appreciate the efforts of France, Germany, and Great Britain to interface with the Iranians, all attempting to convince them that they must give up their nuclear weapons programs. And we'll work closely with IAEA, as well as the United Nations, to effect that end. And I feel comfortable that we can achieve a understanding with the Iranians on the diplomatic front.

Upcoming Iraqi Elections/Completing the Mission

Mr. Ahmed. We've got to go back to the Iraqi election again. I want to talk about the Iraqi election. Also, we see the future of the coalition forces there, the future of the U.S. forces over there. How do you see the future of the coalition forces after the election in Iraq?

The President. Well, I think it's very important for the Iraqi citizens to know what I've been telling the American citizens, and that is, is that we will stay as long as is necessary to help the Iraqis secure their country. And we'll come home as soon as possible. But that mission must be completed. And the mission is to train Iraqi soldiers, to give Iraqis the tools and the command structure necessary to be able to fight off the few who want to stop the aspirations of the many.

I've heard talk about that we are occupiers. No, the United States and our troops and our coalition are there to help the Iraqi citizens. And so our mission is to do our job as quickly as we can and then come home.

Now, it is up to the Iraqi citizens to eventually fight off the terrorists, and we want to give them the tools necessary to do so. And I think we're making good progress. I mean, obviously there's more work to be done, but many Iraqi units have proven themselves worthy in fighting off these terrorists. And it's important for the Iraqi citizens to know that their own citizens are out defending their freedom.

Iraqi Troops

Mr. Ahmed. And this is—you put it as an exit strategy—with regard to the training that you just mentioned here right now, what exact number you think for Iraqi force already being trained in Iraq?

The President. Oh, how many have been trained so far?

Mr. Ahmed. Yes.

The President. Well, I think we've trained 120,000, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're ready. There's a difference between quantity and quality. And so our focus over the next year will be to make sure that the quality of the troops is necessary. And there's been great progress on the ground. Some of the fighting units in Iraq have been very strong and very capable. We want to make sure there's a command structure—in other words, from top to bottom there's a chain of command that will enable forces to move at the will of the Iraqi Government. In other words, when the Iraqi Government makes a decision to go defend the Iraqi people, that there's decisive and quick movement.

And we're making progress. There's more work to be done. That's the point. There's more work to be done on the border guards. There's more work to be done with infrastructure guards. There's more work to be done with the regular army as well as the national guard and the police. But we're there to help, as are other countries.

Future Iraq-U.S. Military Relationship

Mr. Ahmed. After securing Iraq and having the Iraqi security forces able to secure their country, there is talk about the thought that here in Washington, they might be a permanent U.S. military base on Iraq. How do you—

The President. Well, that's going to be up to the Iraqi Government. A Government elected by the people will be making the decisions as to how best to secure their country, what kind of help they need to make sure their democracy is able to flourish. And I think the free world will be willing to provide that help. But these are sovereign decisions made by an elected Government.

You know, it hasn't been all that long that we transferred sovereignty to the current Government. It was last June of 2004 that sovereignty was transferred and that Iraqi citizens could see Iraqis making the decisions necessary to move forward. And now the elections will start a process so that by the end of this year there will be an elected Assembly that will be honoring a constitution approved by the people. And it's—I think it's a glorious moment.

And I, again, want to reiterate what I said. I hope the Iraqis—the Iraqis I've heard from have this great desire for freedom. And I hope they're willing to exercise their right and defy the terrorists. The terrorists have no vision for Iraq. They have no vision for a positive and hopeful country—unlike the people who will be elected, who will be listening to the voices of the Iraqis as they develop a society which will help educate people and provide health care. The businesses will flourish in Iraq. Iraq has got—Iraqis have got a great entrepreneurial spirit. They're good businesspeople, and of course we want to help.

Syria

Mr. Ahmed. Another country that is so essential to the security in Iraq, that country is Syria—the Interim Iraq Government accusing Syria of aiding the former regime element and providing a safe haven to the thousands of former Ba'athists. The Syrian Government is saying they are only a few hundred, and they cannot control their border. How do you plan to deal with Syria to this regard?

The President. Well, we've sent messages to the Syrians, very clear messages that they should not be meddling, on the one hand, and they should do everything they can to prevent money, arms, people from going from Syria into Iraq whose intent it is to de-

stabilize and terrorize the citizens and harm our soldiers. And we expect the Government to act on our request.

But it's just not our request. It's also the request of the Iraqi Government. Prime Minister Allawi, as you mentioned, has sent a very clear signal to the Syrians that they expect there to be cooperation and a 100 percent effort to prevent people who would destabilize the Iraqi Government from getting into Iraq.

Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Mr. Ahmed. Mr. President, another issue is so essential to the area; that is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The latest joint survey conducted by Palestinian and Israeli shows that majority of Palestinians and Israelis support the idea of the permanent two-state solution that you laid out in your peace plan, the roadmap. But the problem is about how to move forward, how to get there. Today, here, again, I need to have a news from you about how we going to have something really new to accelerate the process.

The President. Well, I think you've seen something new that will help accelerate the process, and that is Abu Mazen, who has been elected by the Palestinians, who's showed strong leadership. He has declared that they will do everything they can to protect innocent life from terrorists as well as consolidating security forces. And, therefore, we're on the roadmap. In other words, there's a commitment by this man toward—heading toward peace. And there's obligations for both sides as we go down the path toward the establishment of a Palestinian state. And our job is to hold people to their word, is to say, "Wait a minute. This has happened"—how the Israelis must make it easier for people to move, for example, or make sure tax revenues move to the Palestinian Government so that they're able to more fully function.

At the same time, we very strongly support the conference in London, which will help the Palestinians develop a strategy to develop the institutions necessary for a state to emerge. I'm sending Condoleezza Rice, who was confirmed today as the Secretary of

State, to show our commitment to the Palestinian cause, a cause based upon peace, a cause based upon democracy.

Again, I'm very optimistic about the establishment of a Palestinian state. I'm optimistic because the leadership is showing strength. I'm optimistic because there is a very strong entrepreneurial class of people that can—if given a chance, will be able to develop small businesses in the industrial sector that will help the Palestinians find work.

I'm very optimistic because I believe that most Israelis do understand that in the long term their survival depends upon a democratic state coexisting peacefully with Israel. And I'm very optimistic because I believe the world now sees an opportunity to come together to help the process forward. And so I'm—I can't make you a prediction, but I can tell you that I believe that a Palestinian state is very possible. And we look forward to working with the parties who have declared themselves willing to fight off the terrorists and develop a peaceful society.

Prospective Visit by Abu Mazen

Mr. Ahmed. By mentioning Abu Mazen, that—my time is up, this is going to be the last question. You mentioned you're going to send Dr. Rice. And are we expecting to see you inviting Abu Mazen here to the White House? And just to have a clear assurance, whether you think there is enough agreement and work for you to get the Palestinian state made by 2009?

The President. Well, that's a very good question. Hopefully—I'm a person who tries to avoid timetables because sometimes it creates expectations that may not be met. I would hope that we could establish a Palestinian state as quickly as possible. And the United States of America as well as friends and allies will be willing to help along those lines. It is conceivable it could happen before then if there is that firm commitment. And it looks like there is a firm commitment.

Secondly, I had the honor of welcoming Abu Mazen here to the White House before. I'd love to see him again at his convenience. He's got a lot of work to do, and it's up to him to decide when he wants to travel. And if he wants to come to the United States, if he chooses to do so, of course he's invited.

I saw him in Aqaba, Jordan, so I've had a chance to meet with this man twice. And it's—he's a fellow who has, initially, in his new position, made some very difficult decisions, but the right decisions. And I think the Palestinians, if they continue to follow a path toward peaceful relations and the development of a free state where people can express their opinions and have dissent and an open press, there's a very good chance the state will happen. And I'm looking forward to that.

Mr. Ahmed. Mr. President, thank you so much.

The President. Thank you, sir. Lukman, good job.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 1:23 p.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Ayad Allawi of the Iraqi Interim Government; and President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) of the Palestinian Authority. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Remarks in a Discussion on Health Care Information Technology in Cleveland, Ohio

January 27, 2005

The President. Thank you, Leavitt. Thank you, Mike. No, thank you all. Thanks for coming. No, please be seated. Thank you. Thanks for the warm reception. It's great to be here at one of the Nation's finest medical complexes. I want to thank you for giving us a chance to come by and talk about how to make sure health care is available and affordable for our fellow citizens.

I am honored Mike Leavitt has agreed to serve our country. He's been in the job 15 hours, and he hasn't made any mistakes yet. *[Laughter]* But he is going to do a great job. He was a former Governor from the great State of Utah. He understands the need for the Federal Government to relate effectively with State governments. The HHS is a complex organization with a lot of tasks. It requires good management skill in order to be an effective Secretary. I am confident that Mike has got the skill set and the vision necessary to do the job.